

John 2:23-3:11

What does it mean to be born again?

What does it mean to be born again? Jesus said to Nicodemus, *Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again'* (John 3:8). Some Christians feel the need to describe themselves as *born again* Christians. They want to distance themselves from nominal Christianity and emphasise their new relationship with God. But the Bible doesn't say there is a special category of *born again* Christians. Rather, Jesus emphasised it was a must for all who would enter the kingdom of God. It looks like it is pretty important!

In fact the importance of this passage to Christian belief and doctrine is emphasised in the passage itself. Three times Jesus declares, *Truly, truly I say to you* (3:5,7,11). He could not be emphasising this teaching more. Yet Nicodemus didn't understand this most basic of doctrines, and neither do most people today, including many Christians. We need understanding to know what Jesus meant by *born again* (see Proverbs 4:5).

We need to recognise that other religions have concepts of new birth. Hinduism believes that after the body dies the soul continues, and will come back in a new body, which depends on your karma, the good or bad things you have done in your life. If you have a good karma you will be born again as a human being. If you have a bad karma you may be born again as an animal. This is reincarnation and it is very different to what Jesus is teaching in John 3.

We have to recognise not all faith is the same. John tells us the kind of faith we need: *these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name* (John 20:31). At the end of John chapter 2 there are people who 'believed' but didn't have this kind of faith. Rather they believed because of the signs Jesus was doing (John 2:23). They did not believe Jesus was the Christ, and Jesus was not fooled: *But Jesus did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people, and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man* (John 2:24). Their faith wasn't based on the testimony Jesus was the Christ but on the exciting miracles.

Nicodemus was one of these people, and he came to Jesus by night (John 3:2). Nicodemus said, ***we know that you are a teacher come from God.*** But ***Jesus knew all people*** (John 2:24), including Nicodemus, and us! Jesus knew that Nicodemus did not yet believe Jesus was the Christ and the only way this was possible was by being *born again*. So Jesus said to Nicodemus, *truly, truly I say to you, unless one of **born again** he cannot see the kingdom of God.* In my Bible (ESV) there is a footnote, *Or, from above. The Greek is purposely ambiguous and can mean both **again** and **from above**.*

Above means 'from heaven'. The word (*anothen*) is used a lot in John, and is always, except in John 3, translated as *above*, otherwise the context doesn't make sense (e.g. John 3:31). So we could use *born from above* instead of *born again*. But Nicodemus understood Jesus to mean *born again*: *How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?* (John 3:4). There is a note of sarcasm here. But Jesus wants Nicodemus to understand, so he repeats himself: *Truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.* This is almost the same, but not quite, and the differences teach us a lot. Instead of saying *born again*, he says, *born of water and the Spirit*. Nicodemus thinks Jesus means *again* in the literal physical sense, but Nicodemus is focused on earthly things, like miracles. Jesus points him to

heavenly things, things from above. In John 3:8 Jesus describes *born again* as *born of the Spirit*. The Spirit comes from above (John 1:32). While Nicodemus thought this was something physical, Jesus points him to something spiritual, from above, from the Spirit of God.

The metaphor of birth helps to describe the spiritual reality to which Jesus was pointing, which like the wind we cannot see with our physical eyes. To be born physically is our entrance into this world, and to be given the gift of life. To be born from above (spiritually) is our entrance into the kingdom of God where Jesus is Lord, and to have life in His name. This is a regenerating work of the holy Spirit which brings us to faith in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God.

But what did Jesus mean by ***water and the Spirit***? Some people think *water* refers to natural birth. But this is stating the obvious and seems unlikely. Some people think *water* is a reference to water baptism. But we are saved by faith in Jesus not by any ritual. Jesus said to the thief on the cross, *Today you will be with me in paradise* (Luke 23:43). He didn't have an opportunity to be baptised! All committed Christians should be baptised as a testimony, and baptism is very helpful to strengthen our faith. But we cannot say it is a must for salvation. Others think that by saying, *of water and Spirit*, Jesus is expounding on what it means to be *born again/from above*, and to me this makes sense. Jesus was surprised that Nicodemus did not know these things, because as an expert in the Hebrew Scriptures (the Old Testament) he could have!

How? Perhaps from Isaiah 44:3, *For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour my Spirit upon your offspring and my blessing on your descendants*. This verse (which is made up of two parallel parts,) uses water (cf living water) as an analogy for the Spirit. But most of all, verses from Ezekiel 36 explain what *born of water and the Spirit* means,

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws (Ezekiel 36:25-27).

Again, the water is equivalent to the Spirit (see John 7:39). However the water emphasises our need for repentance from sin, our need for cleansing, and the Spirit emphasises the new life God gives us in the Spirit. The Apostle Paul teaches the same thing,

But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit (Titus 3:3-5).

The way I understand this is that the washing (water) and renewal of the Holy Spirit (and Spirit) are part of the same experience of God's sovereign work in our lives. This work brings us to faith in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God so we may have life in His name. When we respond to God's work in our lives we will come to realise that Jesus was not simply a miracle worker or a great teacher or even a prophet, but God's Son.

On this Pentecost Sunday may we be open to the work of God's Spirit in our lives.

John 2:23-25 act as link verses between the cleansing of the Temple and the Nicodemus passages.

2v23	Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing .	
2v24	But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people	
2v25	and needed no one to bear witness about man , for he himself knew what was in man .	
3v1	Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews.	
3v1	This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him."	

There is a play on words in 2:23 and 2:24

Many believed / **trusted** in his name ... but Jesus did not **entrust** himself to them

Believe and entrust are the same Greek word.